

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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LONDON PLEASE PASS AMBASSADOR MCCLOSKEY

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT PGOV NL
SUBJECT: CABINET CRISIS: WHITHER VAN AGT?

REF: THE HAGUE 1492

1. THE CAREER OF ANDREAS VAN AGT, WHOSE MAVERICK APPROACH TO POLITICS HAS INSPIRED UNUSUALLY STRONG FEELINGS OF LOVE, HATE AND CONFUSION IN THE DUTCH PUBLIC, REACHED ITS MOMENT OF TRUTH ON MARCH 22 WHEN THE DEN UYL CABINET COLLAPSED, LARGELY BECAUSE OF VAN AGT'S ERRATIC POSITION CHANGES ON THE LAND POLICY ISSUE. CAUGHT BETWEEN HIS GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITIES AS JUSTICE MINISTER AND HIS PARTY POSITION AS LIST LEADER OF THE CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC APPEAL (CDA), WHICH SUPPORTS HIGHER LEVELS OF COMPENSATION FOR EXPROPRIATED LANDS, VAN AGT CHOSE FIRST ONE SIDE, THEN THE OTHER, AND SUCCEEDED IN ALIENATING BOTH. THE CATHOLIC PARTY (KVP) MINISTER'S LOW POINT CAME WHEN HE PRESENTED AN ULTIMATUM TO THE GOVERNMENT, DEMANDING AMENDMENTS TO A BILL HE HAD SIGNED HIMSELF, APPARENTLY WITHOUT CONSULTING HIS CDA

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COLLEAGUES, SOME OF WHOM PROMPTLY REFUTED HIM. HIS INEXPLICABLE BEHAVIOR THROUGHOUT THE EPISODE HAS RAISED SERIOUS QUESTIONS ABOUT VAN AGT'S POLITICAL FUTURE.

2. OVER THE PAST YEAR, VAN AGT HAS BECOME THE MOST JOKED-ABOUT FIGURE IN THE NETHERLANDS DUE TO A HIGHLY PUBLICIZED SERIES OF MISADVENTURES, NOTABLY HIS BUNGLING OF THE PIETER MENTEN CASE

AND HIS CRUSADES AGAINST ABORTION AND PORNOGRAPHY. THE LEFTIST PRESS IN PARTICULAR HAS HEAPED INCREASING SCORN UPON THE MINISTER, WHOM THEY SEE AS A SELF-APPOINTED GUARDIAN OF CATHOLIC MORALITY. ALTHOUGH SATIRISTS PORTRAY HIM AS A NAIVE NINCOMPOOP, VAN AGT STILL COMMANDS A LARGE BASE OF POPULAR SUPPORT, AND IS VIEWED BY MANY AS A LONE WARRIOR WHOSE PRINCIPLES PLACE HIM ABOVE THE DIRTY GAME OF POLITICS.

3. THE ANTI-VAN AGT RHETORIC HAS ESCALATED IN THE WAKE OF THE CABINET'S FALL. HE HAS BEEN WIDELY CONDEMNED FOR TRIGGERING THE CRISIS BY IRRESPONSIBLE STATEMENTS, AND WE HAVE EVEN HEARD SOBER, THOUGHTFUL OBSERVERS SERIOUSLY QUESTION HIS MENTAL STABILITY. THE LABOR PARTY FLOOR LEADER HAS STATED THAT VAN AGT WILL NOT BE WELCOME IN A FUTURE PROGRESSIVE CABINET. HIS CDA COLLEAGUES HAVE TEMPERED THEIR COMMENTS, BUT MANY CLEARLY RUE THE DAY THEY CHOSE VAN AGT TO HEAD THEIR NEW PARTY.

4. THE CDA, AN UNPRECEDENTED MERGER OF THE MAJOR CATHOLIC AND PROTESTANT PARTIES, NOW FACES A SEVERE STRAIN ON ITS FRAGILE UNITY. ANY MOVE TO OUST VAN AGT AS LIST LEADER COULD IGNITE INTERNAL TENSIONS AND POSSIBLY REDUCE THE CDA TO SHAMBLES TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE ELECTIONS. TO CARRY ON WITH VAN AGT AS STANDARD BEARER, HOWEVER, MAY BE DIFFICULT TO STOMACH BOTH FOR CDA POLITICIANS AND FOR THEIR CONSTITUENTS. THE DURABLE JUSTICE MINISTER HAS WEATHERED MANY A STORM, BUT THIS CRISIS WILL BE THE CRUCIAL TEST OF HIS STAYING POWER, AND THAT OF THE CDA.
BROWN

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